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50 tents or 250 men; next to them downward extend the Blackfeet, their number may be 800 men; next to them and who extend to the confluence of the South and North branch, are the Fall or Big Bellied Indians, who may amount to about 600 warriors.[29]

Dislocation and Warfare (1790–1830)

Within a decade of the time of Mackenzie's observations, however, the Gros Ventres were being ousted from between the forks of the Saskatchewan where they had been apparently well established since at least 1772, when Cocking met them.[30] Undoubtedly the Gros Ventres were greatly weakened by the smallpox epidemic of 1780, as Wissler has suggested.[31] In any case they were subsequently pushed south and east by the allied Assiniboine and Cree, who had the great advantage of being relatively well-armed with guns. Thus the Gros Ventres were launched on the most turbulent period of their career, with enmity toward the whites as an important factor.

We know from Harmon how bitterly the Gros Ventres resented the more favorable treatment accorded the Cree-Assiniboine by the traders. He was at Alexandria, a Northwest Company post on the Assiniboine River, and records on June 10, 1801, the following: "It is currently reported and believed that the Rapid Indians are forming a war party to come against the Indians of this quarter, whom they consider, and I think with sufficient reason, as their enemies. If they come this way they will fall on us as upon the natives themselves, for they say that we furnish the Cree and Assiniboine with what firearms they want, while they get few."[32] Although this particular attack on the post did not materialize, there was real reason to have feared it. In the summer of 1793 the Gros Ventres attacked old fort Brulé (South Branch House) and killed all but one of the twenty or so inhabitants; in 1794 they pillaged Manchester House. These two

[29] Mackenzie, v. 1, p. cx.

[30] O. Lewis p. 12, places them East of the South Branch prior to about 1750.

[31] Wissler, 1936, p. 18. Cf. interesting tradition of the ravages of the epidemic, pp. 34–36.

[32] Harmon, p. 51.

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seemingly after the pillaging of this fort about 1826 that part of the Gros Ventres fled to the headwaters of the Missouri, wintered there, and then proceeded south to join their Arapaho kinsmen. According to Hayden, the Gros Ventres spent about five years hunting with the Arapaho and joined them in trading with the Mexicans.[46] During this sojourn, the Gros Ventres suffered a devastating attack of smallpox which was said to have reduced their number by half.

From sources independent of Hayden we know that a large group of Gros Ventres was actually in the Cimarron area during the late 1820's. Gregg, with a party of independent traders, was traveling in the Cimarron Valley when on June 21, 1831, they met a very large group of Indians,—he estimates about a thousand including men, women and children,—who followed them for a day or two in order to pilfer what they could and to receive presents if possible. They were finally bought off with about sixty dollars worth of trade goods contributed by various members of the party. It was thought at first that these Indians were Comanche and Arapaho. "But," states Gregg, "they were principally if not altogether Blackfoot and Gros Ventres." A few days later Gregg received intelligence that Captain Sublette and his party, on their way from St. Louis to Santa Fe, had met "an immense horde of Blackfeet and Gros Ventres," and that although the Indians had assumed a menacing attitude, the party had passed without serious molestation. That same evening, however, Gregg camped near a place called the "Battle Ground," famous for a skirmish which a caravan of traders in the company of Mexican troops had in 1829 with the Gros Ventres. Gregg was told that on that occasion, the traders and troops, under Col. Vizcarra, were camped on the Cimarron when a party of 120 Gros Ventres approached on foot. The traders did not welcome the Indians, but seeing that they were disposed to remain until morning, Col. Vizcarra promised to disarm them. Nevertheless he failed to do so, and all of a sudden the Indians sprang to their feet, gave a yell and fired on the party. A Taos Indian, by giving his own life, saved that of the Colonel. The Mexican troops pursued the Gros

[46] Hayden, 341. The gist of what Hayden gives for this period is correct, though his dates are inaccurate.

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more dependent on trading as their thirst for liquor became greater and greater.

At the time of which we are speaking, 1833, the Gros Ventres and Piegan were at least temporarily at peace. The Assiniboine, however, were strong and, with the Cree, were raiding deep into Gros Ventres territory. They were likewise at enmity with the Piegan. Poorly mounted as they were, they were bold enough to attack Fort McKenzie in 1833, and were driven off by the whites, with very little assistance from the Piegan who were there at the time. The next fall apparently this same band of Cree-Assiniboine cut off sixty lodges of Gros Ventres in the Sweet Grass Hills and the Gros Ventres lost 400, only one escaping to tell the tale.[58]

The Crow, too, were being very troublesome and Bradley describes their siege of Fort McKenzie in 1834.[59] The traders on this occasion finally resorted to firing a cannon which frightened the Crow. To wipe out their disgrace in running away, the Crow rallied under their leader Rotten Belly, and resolved to make an expedition against the Blackfoot. They came across a dozen Gros Ventres warriors, however, near the Fort and satisfied their honor by killing them instead of the Blackfoot. Nevertheless the Gros Ventres had fought bravely and inflicted losses upon the Crow, including their chief who, when he was dying from the wounds, told his people never to attack the whites again. Bradley tells us that the Crow kept to this advice. Nevertheless they continued giving trouble to the Gros Ventres. Bradley says in 1835 that war continued to rage as fiercely as ever. For example, the Gros Ventres killed 40 Crow who had tried to steal their horses near the Fort; some months later they again got the best of a raiding expedition of Crow.[60]

In building up to the position they maintained in 1855, the Gros Ventres were undoubtedly able to profit from the effects of the great smallpox epidemic of 1837–38 which wreaked such havoc among all the Blackfoot groups and the Assiniboine, but which left the Gros Ventres and Crow relatively untouched. Bradley gives

[58] Bradley, 219.
[59] Bradley, p. 216.
[60] Bradley, p. 219. For an account of present Gros Ventre tradition of the first of these two battles, see pp. 94–96.

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an account of the terrible number of deaths among the Blackfoot in 1838 and states that the northern Assiniboine lost two-thirds of their number. He says of the Gros Ventres however that they escaped very lightly, their entire loss being less than 200. "This is to be attributed to their being in a measure innoculated by previous experience with the disease communicated by the Arapahoes in a visit to the south."[61] It may be recalled that Hayden mentions the epidemic which struck the Gros Ventres when they were among the Arapaho. Both are probably referring to the severe, but more or less localized, epidemic which hit the Indians of the Kansas Territory in 1829. Hayden, referring to the five year period during which the Gros Ventres hunted and traded along with the Arapahos—says that during this time: "Smallpox passed among them, having been communicated to them through other tribes with whom they were at peace or carried on a traffic. This disease, at that time, destroyed about half their number, but secured the remainder from the next attack which occurred in 1838. At this later period the smallpox only acted on the young, and destroyed a number of them, but the chiefs and elderly men escaped so that the tribe was not reduced to the disorderly and helpless condition of the Blackfoot and other surrounding nations."[62] That the Blackfoot groups were disorganized to a large extent is borne out by a completely independent source. Father Mengarini in 1841 notes the troublesome raids by the Blackfoot, around St. Mary's Mission among the Flatheads on the Bitter Root River, and adds: "Had not pestilence decimated the tribe the year before our arrival, our mission at St. Mary's would have been impossible."[63]

In the 1840's, then, the Gros Ventres had only one full-strength enemy to contend with, namely, the Crow. Presumably, they took advantage of the opportunity to raid extensively both the Blackfoot groups and the Assiniboine. Nevertheless they evidently continued to keep up their good relations with the whites. Father Point, S.J., who spent the fall and winter of 1846–47 among the Blackfoot and Gros Ventres wrote to Father de Smet regarding

[61] Bradley, p. 226.
[62] Hayden, p. 341.
[63] Mengarini, p. 8.

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seemed that the others present agreed with him, the leader would give in and have the crier announce the revised decision."

On the march, the leader went at the head of his band and showed the way. When several bands were together, the leader of one would have decided where he intended to go, and, if the other bands had decided to go along with this one, they followed, but were free to break away at any time.

The band to which either the Keeper of the Flat Pipe or the Keeper of the Feathered Pipe belonged had a certain distinction as there was a tendency when the tribe split for each to have a considerable following.

According to tradition, as related by The Boy, the Gros Ventres had had in the fairly remote past a formally selected chief or leader of the whole tribe. It was said that he functioned when the whole tribe was together and that his decisions in important matters were made in consultation with the chief men, including the leaders of all the bands. There was no regular council and anyone present might express his opinion. Often the Keepers of the Sacred Pipes were present at such meetings called by the tribal chief, but if they were not present they were supposed to be kept advised.

The last regularly selected leader of the whole tribe was said to have been White Eagle, who held this position in the last decades of the eighteenth century. It was said further that White Eagle was preceded by White Shield, of whom there are many stories extant, and that White Shield was preceded by Elk Going Against The Wind. The Boy gave the following information regarding the "election" of White Eagle. The account was given to The Boy by his father, Lame Bull, who had it from Old Man Gopher, a cousin of Lame Bull's paternal grandfather. "The Gros Ventres had been badly decimated by smallpox and only about 30 lodges were left.[9] Old Man Gopher and his sister, both of them very young children at the time, were the only survivors of their family. The old men among the survivors of the tribe got together and proceeded to choose a chief. White Eagle was then a young man

[9] A reasonable chronological estimate would identify this as a tradition referring to the devastating smallpox epidemic of 1780. For historical data, see p. 9.

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Another instance was given by The Boy regarding his father. 764
"Lame Bull was on a buffalo-hunting party when his brother-in-law was killed during an encounter with the enemy. They brought [729]
the body as it was back to camp, where it lay for quite a while. Lame Bull finally went to his tipi and got leggings and a shirt of his own, although he was Flat Pipe Keeper at the time and it was [784]
taboo for one holding this office to give his clothes to the dead. Nevertheless Lame Bull removed the bloody clothes from the body of his brother-in-law, washed the body and dressed it in his own clothes. He paid for this kindness, however, because for nine years thereafter he had such pains in his legs he was not able to walk,—this being the punishment he suffered for breaking the rules by which the Keeper of a sacred pipe should live."

Before finally disposing of the body "something very expensive," like a big silk handkerchief, was placed over the face. The whole body, including the head, was then wrapped securely in a blanket or robe and tied "like a mummy." The body was placed on a stretcher and put in a forked tree, if practicable, the head to the setting sun. Otherwise the corpse might be laid on a knoll and a structure like a sweatlodge built over it to protect it from the wild beasts; or it might be laid in the cleft of a cliff and covered with rocks.[8] For a particularly prominent man, however, his own 766
lodge might serve as his last resting place. In that case holes would be dug in which the lodge-poles were placed, in order that the structure would be more permanent. The body was laid in the lodge amidst rich furnishings. The ears of the lodge were closed, the cover pegged down, and the whole secured as well as possible. This was done, for instance, for The Boy's maternal grandfather and for one of his maternal uncles. Al Chandler remembers that when he himself was a small boy upon the death of his uncle, Rises Again, the body was placed on a bedstead in a big lodge erected about a half-mile from his house.

Even in times of great stress, such as in a smallpox epidemic 764
when so many died that "the trees along the Milk River were just [765 731]
loaded with bodies," as much care as possible was taken to place the bodies properly in their last resting place. When there was no more space on the trees, a large number of bodies were put in a

[8] Cf. Kroeber, 1908, p. 181.

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764 lodge at some little distance from the camp. As exceptions to the rule, however, Coming Daylight told of a couple of instances which came within her experience in the first epidemic which she remembers. One case concerned a man who simply left the body of one of his wives where she had fallen and Coming Daylight [766 73] came across the bones of that woman stripped of flesh by wild animals during the night. The other case was that of a man who mercilessly covered with stones the body of his infected sister, in spite of the fact that she was still alive.

[178] Only in relatively recent times has burial in the ground been common. This is illustrated by the comments of Coming Daylight in connection with a long story about a visit to a relative who was married to a white trader. "On this occasion my father's father was killed and scalped by the Piegan just outside of the white man's stockade. The white men brought in the body. He had been scalped and was bloody all over. These whites washed him, bound up his head, and dressed his body in their own clothes,—even to putting shoes on his feet. We thought that peculiar and some of our relatives wanted instead to put on him the best pair of beaded moccasins we had. My father said, however, that he wouldn't interfere as long as they were fixing him up in their way. So the whites buried him just like they do their own. The Gros Ventres never did that—they put the corpse up high somewhere, usually in a tree. We thought it was bad enough for our relatives to die, much less covering them up with earth. My maternal grandmother, who was there at the time, said: 'When I leave you, I don't want you to mourn for me because I have lived to be just as old as anyone should be. All I ask is that you see to it that I am fixed up the right way. Don't let them dig any hole for me. I want you to lay me up in a cliff in a nice quiet place, just make a bed for me and lay me there.' When she died, that is just what was done for her."

It was customary, prior to the time that the Gros Ventres settled down, to place some of the personal belongings of the deceased with the body.[6] When a beloved son died, for instance, his favorite horse might be taken along and killed at the place where the body was laid away. Similarly a minor pipe might have been

[6] Cf. Kroeber, 1908, p. 180.

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anything. So Coming Daylight took her infant to her aunt who was a kind of "spiritualist" (one having a ghost helper). The aunt took the baby in her arms and told Coming Daylight: "You get me a piece of charcoal." The aunt took the charcoal and rubbed it on the baby's neck at the back, bent over as if she were going to bite the infant, drew out (apparently by sucking) a little sliver from the baby's neck, and said: "This is what caused her to have a stiff neck." They said a spirit had shot her, although they did not have the baby outside when this happened to her. You were not supposed to take an infant outside in the dark without covering its head. Actually Coming Daylight's infant was inside the tent during the night and they heard something hit a lodge pole and it seemed to frighten the baby, who continued to cry until the aunt removed the sliver.

Mental abnormality could also be caused by such bad spirits, ghostly or other, whether by "shooting" the victim or getting into him is not known. To keep the bad spirits at bay, a stick, with its tip blackened with "nicotine," was left near a baby whenever the baby had to be left alone. Whenever adults went out in the dark, they picked up and carried a stick, of any kind; it was believed that the spirits were afraid of the sticks and would not come near. Beyond such protective observances there appears to have been no cult proper of these bad spirits in the way of propitiatory prayers or offerings.

Much, though not all sickness was ascribed to a malevolent being called Atsa:. When illness recently took off a mother and child in a family, the people said, "Atsa: has visited so-and-so's family." Atsa: did not himself put sickness-causing objects in his victims' bodies, but he was responsible indirectly for other kinds of illness, that is, he had something to do with them. To him were attributed particularly epidemics, especially smallpox, chicken pox and measles. He was an ugly, hideous being, unkempt, with scaly skin and bushy hair who never washed his face. He was thin and starved-looking and his nails were long. He was thoroughly disliked. No food or pipe was ever offered to him. When serious sickness visited the camp, the Supreme Being was prayed to: "Take Atsa: away. He is causing a lot of trouble." Atsa: was

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"nothing compared to the Supreme Being." At an eclipse of the sun the Gros Ventres were much afraid; for they thought that the sun was covering himself and that Atsa: would come around. To ward him off on the occasion of a solar eclipse, the Gros Ventres in recent times would load their guns and shoot up in the air, and so make so much noise that he would be scared away. Then they would all laugh, feeling that they had gotten the best of him. Atsa: also functioned as a bugaboo. When Thomas Main was a boy his parents used to tell him: "If you don't behave, Atsa: will get you." Atsa: was afraid of skunks, as the Gros Ventres of several generations ago learned from the following incident, related by The Boy.[28]

"In the days of Gopher and Prairie Dog Old Man, Atsa: declared war. At that time the Gros Ventres were very numerous. There were only twelve bands but they were so big and there were so many people that when the children played around they would get lost and could not find their way home. When the crier walked around and made his announcements, after only one circle around the camp he was hoarse and was tired from walking. A large part of Gros Ventres went off on a war raid to the east to fight the Shoshoni, Assiniboine and Sioux. They got a little below the confluence of the Milk and Missouri Rivers, and saw two corpses wrapped in good blankets up in a tree. So they cut the bundles loose and dropped the bodies to the ground. The blankets, of white-man make, were a novelty to the Gros Ventres at the time. The men unwrapped the blankets and cut them up for leggings.

"That same night one of the Gros Ventres took ill. As the night wore on he got worse and worse. The men began to suspect: 'These two must have died of smallpox.' The sick man died after sun-up in the morning. They became panic-stricken. 'Sure enough,' they said, 'that's smallpox.' They decided to rush back to the main camp.

"On the way back every night one or more men died. Only a few got back alive. Most of the party died on the way back. When

[28] The incident probably is part of the tradition of the smallpox epidemic of 1780. Cf. Flannery, 1953, p. 34.

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the survivors reached home and told their story, the people were excited. The old people said: 'That is a bad sickness. It all but kills off the tribe once it starts.' The criers announced to the people: 'Scatter in all directions. That is the only way to combat this sickness.' So the bands scattered in all directions. A lot of the people died, some even before camp was broken.

"One band went up Milk River. One man of this band who had a big family studied what he should do. He decided to go off secretly from his band. He had plenty of meat, as it was in the fall. So he sneaked away unnoticed with his family, went up the Milk River looking for the thickest patch of brush and trees he could find, and there pitched his camp. The next spring, the survivors of this man's band, which had wintered around the Sweet Grass Hills, decided that the sickness was over, and that Atsa: must be in a good humor again and had left them. The survivors went looking for the rest of the Gros Ventres, so they packed up and left their camp, where in many lodges all the inmates were dead. They made their way toward the place where the Marias and Teton Rivers empty into the Missouri. As they went along they found some whole camps wiped out by smallpox, other camps with just a few lodges with some survivors. These survivors would then join them. At last they reached the Marias and decided to camp there and send scouts around to look for the other survivors.

"A group of young men acting as scouts went down the river to its confluence with the Missouri and ran onto a camp where they saw someone walking around in front of a lodge. As soon as this person saw them he disappeared. They approached and looked into the lodge, but could at first see only a bunch of dead bodies in it, though the fire was burning. They then went in to investigate and found a small boy and small girl there, each living with the dead body of his and her mother. The boy and girl fought and bit like animals not to be taken away. The young men saw the places where the boy and girl had been sleeping beside the bodies of the dead mothers. They saw also a bear that lived in this lodge and fed on the corpses. They looked in other lodges and found that the bear must have lived there too on the dead bodies. It had not eaten of the supply of meat which was still untouched.

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"The young men then took the boy and girl back to camp where some families took them and tamed them down. The young men kept scouting for survivors along the Missouri River and on both sides of the Bear Paw Mountains but could find none. All the living then moved to the north end of the Bear Paws and camped. They decided to stay there and wait. Most of the Gros Ventre camps had been entirely wiped out. The survivors felt bad about it, but there was plenty to eat. They had taken along with them the meat supplies of the deceased victims. It was now far along in spring and they thought the danger was over.

"The man who had spent the winter in the thick timber now decided to move around and look for his people. He started toward Marias River and found the other Gros Ventre survivors' camp north of the Bear Paws. The man, his wives and all their children had come through the epidemic without sickness. The people asked the father: 'How did you escape getting sick?' He replied: 'Just by accident. I happened to kill a skunk, to windward of our camp, and just left the carcass at the spot, as I had no use for it. We were forced to smell it. In time we all got used to the stench. In the timber we felt safe from enemies and we dared not go far from camp. So we stayed there in spite of the skunk. But we were all the time worried lest the children or myself should die. As time went on and no one got sick, I laid our good fortune to the skunk carcass. I thought that Atsa: must be afraid of skunks. So I started to kill as many as I could and I hung them around in every direction, so that no matter from what quarter the wind blew we always had skunk smell. I honestly believe skunks are too much for him.' The people agreed with him, for he proved his belief by the fact that he and all his family had come back safe. Since then the Gros Ventres have known that Atsa: is afraid of skunks."[29]

Both giants and dwarfs were believed to exist. The giants were as tall as trees. When one of these got a buffalo he would stick it on his belt just as the Indian did with rabbits. The giants were

[29] The Gros Ventres know that the Cree of the Ft. Belknap area use skunk fluid for many medical purposes; the Gros Ventres however do not. In Gros Ventres lore the animal kingdom calls the skunk "Chief Stripe."

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755
757 sional individuals; supernatural remedies used only by professional medicine men or women with power.

Natural Remedies

751
515 Both preventive and curative measures of the natural or rational order were numerous.

The most common preventive measure was the daily early morning plunge in the stream or roll in the snow by men, a practice carried out for hardening the body as well as for cleaning it. In small epidemics scattering and isolation were regularly resorted to in order to check the spread of the disease. The use of skunk fluid as a curative was more a Cree than a Gros Ventre procedure, but there was a Gros Ventre belief that skunk fluid diluted with water and put into the eyes of a person was a preventive and cure of snow-blindness. A mother, on knowing herself pregnant again, would cease nursing her infant lest it suffer from "bad stomach and diarrhea." Drinking the blood of a freshly butchered buffalo was looked upon as a preventive of tuberculosis.

757 Curative measures of the rational order were of many kinds. We recorded the following, but our list is far from exhaustive. All of them may best be classified as "domestic remedies," measures of common knowledge, resorted to by everybody who wished to use them, and not considered proprietary right of particular individuals.

757
278 Many herbal curatives came under this category.[3] The roots of "sweetheart briars," so called because the burrs stuck so tightly, were used for colds, and the deeper the root the stronger was the medicine.[4]

An infusion of peppermint is now used as a beverage by everybody for "fits, spasms and stomach disorders," although the medicinal use of peppermint was formerly the monopoly of Flat Pipe keepers. A very strong drink was made by boiling a certain root and just a little of it drunk as a cure for difficulty in urination.

[3] Cf. list in Kroeber, 1908, pp. 224-27. We made no attempt in the field to get a full list of such herbal and other curatives.

[4] The Piegan, according to Coming Daylight and Singer, used these as "blood medicine."